

FROST IMPERILS FRUIT



Gary Craft of G&S Orchard in Walworth, Wayne County, puts fertilizer on blueberry bushes. Craft says that most of his crops are four weeks ahead of schedule. JAMIE GERMANO/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Farms wage desperate battle on frigid nights

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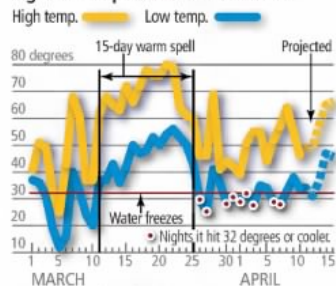
THE LILACS

The recent cold weather has been good news for the lilacs at Highland Park, at least when it comes to timing their flowering to next month's Lilac Festival. While the bushes had started to bud, the lilacs were not damaged by frost, said Mark Quinn, superintendent of horticulture for Monroe County Parks and Recreation. "The longer it stays cool, the better shape we are," he said. The Lilac Festival is set for May 11-20. Organizers will announce entertainment and release this year's poster on Tuesday.

Killer frost watch

Frost will most likely damage tender shoots and flowering buds whenever the temperature holds at 32 degrees F or cooler.

High/low temperatures since March 1



SOURCE: National Weather Service

KEVIN M. SMITH/GRAPHICS EDITOR

At 1:30 a.m. a couple Mondays ago, Gary Craft placed a call to the local fire marshal, not to report a fire but to warn of one.

"I told him we were having a controlled burn," said Craft, the owner of G&S Orchards at the corner of Atlantic Boulevard and Lincoln Road in Walworth, Wayne County. "He said, 'It's 1:30 in the morning' and I said, 'Yeah, but I've got to warm it up a bit here.'"

Craft's neighbors weren't pleased with all the smoke billowing into the frigid air, but he was more than willing to put up with their reaction because the brush fires he lit were necessary to help ward off frost damage to his early budding cherry, blueberry and apple bushes and trees.

Like most area fruit growers, Craft has been affected by the bizarre weather conditions western New York has seen this spring. The record heat in mid-March had the buds blooming far earlier than normal, and then when overnight temperatures dipped into the

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Frost

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20s a few times in recent weeks, those buds were put in danger.

"This is the first year it has been this bad," said Craft, who has farmed this property just east of Penfield for more than 20 years. "I've never seen a March where we were up into 80 degrees. My uncle lives down the road here, he works 4,000 acres of grain, he's 76 and he's never seen something like that. This is unique. We need it to stay warm now."

Herm Young, a retired Xerox engineer who has farmed about 20 acres of land in Williamson, Wayne County, since 1984, grows just about any fruit you can imagine including apples, cherries, pears, plums, nectarines, raspberries, blackberries, apricots and grapes. He did some inspecting of his property Monday, and for now, he believes he "dodged a bullet."

He squeezed buds on some nectarine and apricot bushes, and some were dead, but many more had survived, at least for now. He recognizes he's not out of the woods yet as more cold overnight temperatures are forecast for this week.

"If you looked at the reports, this was the warmest March in history, and the second-closest was in 1945," said the 59-year-old, who grew up on his parents' farm in Sodus. "My dad was growing about 20,000 bushels of apples at the time and that year they picked just a touch over 1,000 bushels. Whether we'll see that kind of damage over a widespread area, probably not. But we're going to lose some."

Not as much, though, as Jim Allen, president of the New York Apple Association, feared a couple weeks ago. Right after the cold snap there were estimates that the statewide apple crop — 60 percent of which comes from Wayne, Or-



Gary Craft shows the red buds on a blueberry bush. Normally they would be barely green. JAMIE GERMANO

leans and Niagara counties — could suffer losses in the tens of millions of dollars. Allen has since amended his forecast based on the most recent reports from Cornell Cooperative Extension's Lake Ontario Fruit Program.

"It looks like we're in pretty good shape so far," said Allen. "It was premature to predict damage. When we had the low temperatures, our tree development wasn't as far out as we thought it was. And the last two weeks with the cool temperatures the trees haven't grown much. There was some isolated frost damage, but certainly not a crop failure by any means."

Farmers like Craft and Young are somewhat protected by their proximity to Lake Ontario and the warmer air, but farther inland where the temperatures are cooler, there is more potential for damage.

"I know further south they had bud damage, and west of the city they were seeing problems with their apples within a day," said Young. "Closer to the lake, the moderation of the temperature really helps."

Finger Lakes grape growers said they won't know the extent of any damage to their crops until later. Any damage will show up when the grapes bloom in mid-June, but damage to the trunks may not be apparent until the vines are stressed by a dry spell.

"The shoots could get out anywhere from 8 to 10 inches and they look perfectly normal and all of a sudden they die," said

John Brahm, owner and winemaker of Arbor Hill Grapery and Winery in South Bristol, Ontario County.

However, he said, the grapes are still dormant, "although some early varieties were starting to push."

"Right now it doesn't appear that we sustained significant damage in the Finger Lakes," said Glen Shaw, co-owner of Wishing Well Vineyards in South Bristol, who primarily grows table grapes. "...I think we have some damage, but we also leave extra buds each year to account for bud loss."

Shaw said wind helped mix the 17-degree air near the ground with the higher, warmer air. In Ovid, Seneca County, however, the wind died down just before the temperature fell to 23 degrees, so Cameron Hosmer of Hosmer Winery hired a helicopter to do the work.

From 5:30 to 7:30 a.m. March 27, the helicopter flew over his 60-acre vineyard on Cayuga Lake to mix the air. His De Chaudon and Cabernet Franc grapevines already had half-inch buds and the other six varieties had come out of dormancy.

"You can't really tell" whether the trunks sustained any damage," he said. "You can't X-ray them or give them an MRI ... I'm optimistic, though. You have to be in this business."

Craft's main concern right now is his cherry and blueberry crops, and he has had to rev up his frost fans on several nights. The industrial-sized blowers push the colder, stagnant air out, forcing its replacement with warmer air from higher levels.

"The guy who scouts the farms looked at our cherries and he thought we were OK, but (the buds) keep getting out farther and farther and this cold weather is not good for us," he said.

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